

Shirley Williams, UK

Peer, former MP and Cabinet Minister, co-Founder of Social Democratic Party (SDP)

On Shirley's family: "My father always took the view that a girl or a woman could achieve as much as a boy or a man. [This was] unlike a lot of people of his generation who were literally handing out cigars if a boy was born and commiserations if a girl was born. My father found that grating and very unattractive. So from when I was about five he was always saying you can be whatever you want to be. That was rare [for that time]."

On what made it possible for Shirley to be one of very few women in the UK to set up a political party: "The main thing I think was the idea of group leadership. We never had a single leader. It was a deliberate move towards a more equal concept of leadership: just a group of four. We made all the major decisions together."



"We treated each other very much as equals. We were perceived by the public and the press to be on the same level, four people together. That attracted a lot of interest. People were quite fascinated by group leadership. We had a clear policy about, for example, broadly equal proportions for men and women on the Executive Committee and that kind of thing. At that point we were well ahead of the both Conservative and Labour parties."

Shirley's experience of politics in the House of Lords: "The nature of the House of Lords is one in which there really is debate, not conflict but debate. That's because each point of view is treated with considerable respect. People actually get together and talk to one another instead of shouting at one another. So paradoxically, although the Lords are very ancient in one way and old fashioned, in another way it's actually more modern than the House of Commons, because it puts aside the aggressive adversarial style of politics. Many, many women in the House of Lords feel much more comfortable there than they would in the Commons."

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